

Prologue

Spring 1835 A.F.R.

When the Moon Mother grew full and bright in the night sky, Sarafine knew it was time to move on. A year entire she spent in prayer and contemplation, in preparation to leave this world and enter the next. It was not a thing to be done lightly or carelessly for a woman like her: young, untouched, her womb unused and fertile. She would leave the world without paying the debt to her people. Sarafine understood that she may not be allowed to join her ancestors, that there may not be a gate through which she could enter the afterlife. But perhaps, if the Mother was kind, she would enter this world again as a tree, to shelter her people against the storms.

In the beginning, the excuses were made throughout the village. The girl had a healthy appetite. If she ate enough food for two, she was not the first grief stricken woman to do so. When she gave up hunting and took up spinning, the action was met with general approval. Perhaps Tammen's daughter was finally ready to mate. A woman handy with a needle was more likely to attract a man than a woman handy with a bow. Even when she started trading for herbs known to strengthen the womb, no suspicions were raised. The girl had been raised by her father against all custom. Tammen had been a stubborn old goat, the Goodmothers whispered, refusing to bring another woman into his homestead. Who knew what odd habits the daughter had acquired without a woman to set her straight?

When Sarafine's belly began to grow, the truth became obvious.

It should have been a joyous occasion. Many had suggested that a child may fix whatever had gone wrong with Tammen's daughter following his death. To carry a child was the Mother's blessing on their dwindling race. But what Sarafine had done was nothing short of a sacrilege.

The Atti were an old race, older than snow, older than time. They were the first men to have walked the earth, conceived and birthed by the Mother herself. Every mating among the Atti was blessed by the Goodmothers and performed under the full moon. To conceive a child without the proper rites and ceremonies, to conceive a child in secret was to battle with destiny. To deny one's heritage and fate.

The rumors swept through the village, an avalanche of nightmarish stories, all suggesting that the father of the child must be an outsider, that no honest Atti man would have mated in secret. If this was the case, Sarafine would not have been the first. The Atti women have fallen prey to the hunters beyond the mountains before. The crime for mating with the outsiders was punished by exile.

Yet, Tammen had been well loved. His wife, Sarafine's mother, had been a Goodmother herself, blessing many unions before her untimely death. The Goodmothers could not agree to exile a child of one of their own based only on whispers and rumors. They proceeded to beg and bully their way through every homestead, determined to find the father of Sarafine's child.

The deed was to be done outside. She would not have the Mother think that she was hiding. With her father's blade tightly wrapped in her furs, she made her way through the forest in a search for a clearing. She would cross over while illuminated by the Mother's eye. She prayed in whisper, unmindful of the cold and the snow; all things of this life had become unsubstantial and unimportant. It was all mist, soon to be parted.

After nearly a fortnight of sifting carefully through the village, the truth could no longer be denied. The child growing in Sarafine's womb was a child of an outsider. By all customs, the girl was to face an exile. Still, the Goodmothers hesitated. Such had been the influence of her parents, such was the respect the village still held for their memory, that none would speak openly against her.

If a boy could be found, a boy willing to take her with a child in tow, the exile could be avoided. Old Meritha had one such boy, a blind poor soul who could neither hunt nor gather. A poor match for anyone but a woman disgraced. Sarafine's child could grow under the watchful eyes of the entire village. It would never be allowed to mate and disgrace the bloodline further, but it could be accepted as an Atti. Just this once, for the memory of Sarafine's mother and father, an exception could be made.

The Goodmothers voted and the oldest among them was chosen to speak with Sarafine.

Patiently, she waited for a moment of perfect peace and clarity. She would offer herself free of human thoughts and failings. In the silence and the light, she removed her soul as far away from existence as her form would allow. The blade steady in her grip, the heart beating calmly under the flesh and bone. Peace flooded her. The serenity she had been waiting for overtook everything else.

In one breath she felt the blade pierce her skin. In the next, she was lying in the snow, cold and disoriented. Dread filled her. She had failed.

"You did not."

Scrambling to her knees, she found herself facing a white wolf, twice the size of any ordinary beast. Its golden eyes studied her with no fear. Joy exploded in her chest; this then was to be her end. She could have not chosen a more magnificent creature to guide her into the next world.

"The Mother will not allow it," the wolf said and began to change.

Sarafine welcomed Talia as the custom demanded. She set out milk and bread, asked after her household and listened attentively to the Goodmother's stories. Seeing the girl laugh and nod in all the right places, Talia determined that the girl was well in mind as well as body.

After the niceties had been observed, she inquired after the child's father. Sarafine, showing no sign of regret or shame, admitted that the father was not an Atti. Then, just as calmly, informed the Goodmother that the child was conceived under the full moon and with the Mother's blessing.

Deeply disturbed by the girl's confession, Talia attempted to get to the heart of the matter. However, Sarafine would answer no questions. No amount of persuasion would move her. No mentions of duty, honor, her debt to her people, not even the mention of her parents. It was all to no avail.

“Then take an Atti for a father to the child,” Talia urged, “so he will be raised and accepted as one of our own.”

If she was surprised by the offer, the girl did not show it, “My son will never be an Atti. His future was written long before our race walked the earth. It will take him far from here to the worlds yet undiscovered. The snow will never be his home.”

Seeing that Sarafine’s decision was made, Talia urged no more. The girl accepted exile; the customs were preserved. The village and the Goodmothers would be satisfied with the outcome. Sarafine promised to remove herself from the village by the next full moon and Talia took her leave with a heavy heart. For the first time she felt that the Mother’s will had been unclear.

The eye wrenching change lasted moments only, leaving her with a pain in her temples and a deep nausea in her breastbone. She choked on the cold air like a child passing its first rites.

The wolf was gone. In its place knelt a man, pale as the snow surrounding him. Silver cape of hair draping over his shoulders, only the golden eyes there to remind her of what he had been. His face was all knowing, all forgiving, a face of the Mother’s own child borne from her silver womb. Soundlessly, he unfolded from the ground and came to her, the snow melting as he passed. When he embraced her, she knew no more.

Sarafine’s decision was accepted. When she came into the village with her large belly leading the way, the mothers told their children to avert their eyes. The single men pretended not to see her while the single women hissed and jeered. Only from the eldest among them she encountered silence and pity. They traded with her out of the respect for her parents and the knowledge that she would soon be gone.

As the time of her departure came near though, Sarafine fell ill with an unexplained fever. It appeared to be a passing thing, nothing but chills and an insistent pain behind her eyes, yet as soon as it seemed certain that the fever had run its course, it would return. The time of her departure came and went. The discontent grew in the village. No bastard had ever been birthed among the Atti. No one knew what the consequences of such a thing could be, but wild rumors took hold again, the worst spelling out the end of the entire Atti race.

Torn, Talia summoned a council, asking all of the Goodmothers to attend. The child was to stay in the womb another fortnight at least, long enough for the girl to recover. Yet, no one could predict how the fever would affect the birthing time. Talia was a mother herself, with a daughter not much older than Sarafine. How could she send a child carrying a child out into the unknown, sick and helpless?

Drawing on her authority as the eldest, she informed the others that the Mother had blessed Sarafine’s union, meaning to convince them that no harm would come to the village as a result of the child.

The result of her announcement was catastrophic. She understood too late that the Mother’s will should have been clear. She’d underestimated her own people and their fears.

Sarafine had turned her against her own people. This was the explanation the other Goodmother’s spread through the village. The girl had been possessed by an evil spirit and was determined to see an end to all Atti. Talia was nothing but a tool; a foolish old tool at that.

The news spread like wildfire, sowing rage where it passed. Tammen's daughter existed no more. She was the sacrilege, the evil that would destroy them unless they destroyed it first. By nightfall, every man, woman and a child had gathered in the center of the village, torches burning brightly. If she would not leave, they would burn her out.

Sarafine awoke in her hut, her furs dry and her father's blade beside her. She had a moment to think it all a dream. Then she knew, as Atti women had known from the beginning of time, that her womb was no longer empty. The words spoken in the snow came back in a rush, a dream suddenly remembered. She was carrying a wolf-child, the Mother's own, the one who would one day save the world. Save it or destroy it. All alone in the world with an impossible task set on her shoulders. A wolf child with no father. No father and no mother.

She sat up and sheathed the blade. 'The Mother will protect her own,' she whispered. The time would come when she would have to leave the village in a hurry. Many things were not clear to her, but she knew that the day she left, the Atti would be no more.

Old Satmu was the last one to join the circle. He did so with great care, lowering himself gingerly onto the hot sand and folding his legs under with great difficulty.

Lately, everything he did had to be done carefully and even the simplest tasks had become difficult. His bones were hollow and brittle, dead branches of a diseased tree. Decades had passed since his last tooth had abandoned the sinking ship; he'd learned to survive on a diet of broth and pureed fruit. His skin was so thin now that even the lightest pressure caused it to split. Even his bladder and bowels had given up; his life had turned into a game of hit and miss where more often than not, he soiled himself without knowing.

In his thirteen decades he'd buried most of his kin, his wife and all of his children. His grandchildren were grown and had children of their own, as numerous as the grains of sand. Only two of them he'd kept close. A pair of twins, fearless and cunning, smarter than all of the rest put together. The boys had a future ahead of them, a future fraught with adventure and peril. Old Satmu knew this. The future was his calling.

Unlike the other Wise Men, he'd never had to give up his sight to gain an access to the Eye. He'd had the fortune of being born blind and the great Eye opening in the dark had been one of his first memories. Over the years he'd used the Eye countless times, warning of wars, plagues, births and deaths. In his bones he felt that this time would be his last. A great change was coming in waves; he could taste it in the wind and the rain, a change he would not be here to witness. None of the others could feel it coming and this was a great pity for his people. He was the last. Even now, surrounded by the others who shared his calling, he knew himself to be the only one with a clear sight. The Young Ones he called them, men who had yet to even taste their eighth decade. They were little better than children and no less weak, their sight muddy and lazy, lacking focus and will. It was a wonder they saw anything on their own. The old ways were passing. Another century and there would be no more Wise Men, just blind fools wandering through the sands.

Settling in more comfortably, he waited for the chanting to stop. Another bit of nonsense he should have put a stop to decades ago. The Eye did not need to be chanted at; it was not an angry spirit in need of appeasing. He'd allowed it hoping that it might help the Young Ones retain some focus. Once it ended, he opened his eyes in the darkness and the Eye opened within him. He felt the others reel from its power then reach out tentatively, feeding off his ability and offering their energy in support. They were nothing, a drop in the sea that Satmu could easily do without, but he took what they offered and let them see.

The Eye was there for the good of the world, yet so often it showed things that seemed to be of little consequences to the Masscu people. Queens and Kings dying, wars starting and ending, slave markets thriving, strange ships burning and always people perishing. The King of Torra lying ill, poisoned by his stepson. A Yati girl child snatched in the night from an elaborate mansion. In the cave of the of the great Uri leader, Ka-Rakt, his woman struggling to give birth to the heir of the Uri nation. Off the coast of Raviras in the Three Isles, a ship sailing to Torra laden with trade goods and the High Lords eldest son. In the forests of Kayrenas, a robust little girl bringing down her first stag with a single arrow. A plague sweeping through Ichira, striking down high and low alike. Through it all, glimpses and signs flickered, present and future tightly interwoven, a never ending tapestry of life.

In Len Morattin a dark haired girl sat in an apple orchard. Her hands glowed like the sun. The Healer that would heal nations. In Ichira, a small boy huddled in the temple ruins, his sobs echoing off the stones. While Satmu watched, the boy pulled a gold coin out of thin air and his sobs turned to laughter. A Thief, although who he was and why he was shown, Satmu did now know. The pattern began to form in Monolupe, where signal fires ringed the border mountains. A girl child born amidst death. The Warrior. In the Three Isles, the heir to the throne stood among all the riches of the world, covered in blood, his left cheek gaping wide. Just a child too, yet he did not cry. He was the important one; the world would see him as the betrayer, yet his role was the one that truly mattered. He was The Lover.

The four points of the star were set. For some time all Satmu could see was a blinding white light, eternal and uninterrupted. Then suddenly fires broke out as far as the Eye could see and the white became snow.

Off the coast of the Frozen Lands a ship rocked on the waves, a ship covered in ashes. On the deck of the ship a child was born that was not a child, a wolf that was not a wolf, and when the creature cried out, Satmu cried out with it, his last words a warning none would understand.

"He's coming!"

Asim despised the cold. In his line of work he had traipsed through the deserts of Masccu, braved the Black Islands and spent three weeks in the Ichitan court. He'd been stabbed and poisoned and almost beheaded. Twice. He would rather be stabbed again than spend another day in this forsaken miserable land. The icy wind made his joints ache, digging its fingers into the old wounds. There was no seasons in Torra, there was only this never ending winter, this misery of blinding snows and ice crusted rock. The sun, on those rare times it showed its face, gave no warmth.

Yet, a wonder of all wonders, the Kingdom prospered. For now.

A two hundred year old Kingdom of Torra had only had four stable rulers. They were still new to monarchy. The present King was only a handful of years older than Asim but he would not rule much longer. Was there something about eternal winter that shortened one's life expectancy? Asim would not be surprised if that were true.

The trade boomed. As Asim glanced over the harbor, he could count no less than six ships from the Three Isles, two flying the Sorayan colors, three with the flags of Nolor and even one sea cutter with the crimson sails of Monolupe. Other harbors held even more, ships from as far as Ayell. Torra held goods wildly popular in the East; the furs of white bears, fish that could only be found in the icy salt waters, skins of the sea lions and their pups. Only with the recent discovery of the iron ores had they been able to cast their net further, attracting traders from both Ayell and Monolupe. To most other Kingdoms, Torra was a savage nation still and it would stay such for many years to come, despite its rising prosperity.

It had not been an easy assignment for Asim. Playing a Lordling of a middle standing with an indecent trade income, he'd expected to be invited to court. Unfortunately, Torra was not as barbaric as he'd expected. The gold had opened some doors but not all of them. In the end, he'd had to tumble a chamber maid to get the information he needed. Not his favorite technique, but it had paid off. The Queen would be more than interested in the curious line of the Torran succession, as well as the character of the heir apparent. As long as she didn't try and send him back. He shuddered at the thought; perhaps it was time to retire.

At nine and thirty summers, he would not call himself an old man. He's spent more than twenty summers in the service of his homeland and his Queen and he had no regrets. Family, home, those things were very well for other men; he'd never been interested in either. Yet, as the cold wind cut through his coat, he found himself aching for the old homestead in the south of Kayrenass where the earth bloomed and even the rains were gentle on a man. The hills rolling as far as the eye could see, the fields of dew drenched clover and grass, the flocks of sheep strewn like white napkins across the green.

Standing on the deck, he wondered what had possessed him to decline a warm bed for the night. Just because they were sailing out in the morning, there was no reason to spend the night on the ship. It was too late now, of course. With the dawn only a few hours away, soon the snow and ice would be nothing more but distant specs on the horizon.

He studied the distant peaks by the light of the moon, not for the first time wondering what was behind them. No one in Torra had seemed to know or care. It bothered him, this lack of curiosity. If he'd had the misfortune of being born in this snowy nightmare, he would have been into the mountains and through the passes as soon as he was able to walk. There were rumors of men who went to hunt beyond the passes and never returned but those rumors had the sound of often told myths. Asim could not lend them much importance. A month whole spent in the Kingdom and he knew no more of the land beyond it than when he first arrived. Just for this reason, his eyes were often drawn to the peaks, the old and familiar itch of curiosity flaring up each time. It was the same itch that had made him what and who he was, the same itch that had made him invaluable in the service to his home and his Queen. The same itch that now showed him the odd glow among the peaks.

He studied it for a while, wondering if perhaps, just this once, he could just ignore the itch and sail on home clueless. Then he sent for the Captain and the First Mate, reserving his opinion until two more sets of eyes were available. They confirmed his suspicions. It was a glow of fire.

How could fires burn on the snow? Asim could not begin to guess. They spread to the left of the mountains, and even though the glow seemed faint, Asim would guess that the fires burned for hundreds of miles. The First Mate made a warding sign and whispered some nonsense about dragons. Instead of telling the man that he was being foolish, Asim only shrugged, allowing that yes, perhaps there were dragons. Young dragons, unable to fly yet, otherwise they would likely be soaring over the waters. Latching on to his words, the Captain commanded they sail along the coast until they encountered the source of the fires.

Leaving the man to his business, Asim settled in the prow. At any other time he would have enjoyed a nice little chuckle at the gullibility of grown men who still believed in fairy tales. Large serpents that breathe fire indeed! No, something else was afoot and Asim could not just sail away from it. Every nerve in his body tingled at the thought of a mystery undiscovered, an adventure unplanned. After all, he had the Queen's permission to pursue anything suspicious. It was almost a relief to find something more interesting than the disappearances of the the white bears and the Heir Apparent's propensity for drink.

They sailed through the rest of the night and into the dawn. The morning found them cold and miserable but somewhat closer while the fires still burned. The Captain made no mention of turning back although the crew was beginning to mutter. The idiot man could not think past the fame and riches of discovering the first dragon in over a thousand years. Asim almost felt bad for him.

By midday, the ash clouds had thickened, obscuring the view. They were now sailing blind in an unfamiliar territory. The First Mate and the crew had quieted, their complaints now spoken in a whisper when no one was looking. If they didn't abandon their course soon there would be a mutiny. Asim saw the logic in turning back but his itch had deepened. Studying the outlines of icy rocks shaded in ash, he knew that turning back would be a mistake. One he would very much regret.

His decision was met with disbelief and opposition but nothing would make him change his mind. Only when he threatened to swim to the shore, did the Captain allow him to lower the boat and promise that they would drop the anchor. An hour was all he asked for. It took him a better part of it to row his way to the coast. As the land drew nearer, the air grew heavy and moist, settling in his lungs. Had he actually complained about the cold? Sweat poured out of his every pore. Ash fell thickly, coating him, obscuring the water, the sky, the land. It collected on his compass so quickly that he frantically brushed at it every few seconds, afraid of losing his direction. Still, when the boat sunk onto the ground, his surprise was so great that he almost fell out. Was there an actual cove? A miracle on a coast made of rock and cliffs. Pulling the boat half way up the crushed shells, he looked around and felt discouraged. The world was gray and stiflingly hot. There were no fires to be seen from here, just ash that made it harder and harder for him to breathe. The itch had intensified though, turning into a pain in between his shoulder blades. There was something here, something he had to find. But what was it? And how to find anything in these blinding clouds of gray? He slowly made his way along the water line. He dared not leave it. Once he lost the sound of water, he knew he would have no way of finding it again in time. Large mounds of residue covered rocks grew closer until the

crushed shells ended at the solid wall of a cliff. He stopped, turned on his heel and saw nothing. Frustration climbed up his throat in one moment but in the next he was frozen in one spot, eyes widening in the gloom. The ash had muffled the sounds of the world, cloaking it in eerie silence. But he could still see and one of the mounds had moved. Hadn't it? He stepped towards it cautiously, his extended hands expecting to encounter stone and instead sinking into fur. His heart skipped a beat. A bear? Did he come all this way to be mauled by one of those bears the natives kept nattering on about? The fur moved to the side, revealing a girl tightly wrapped around her large belly. Asim watched her chest rise ever so slowly. Not giving himself the time to think, he wrapped her back up and picked her up as carefully as he could. The pain in between his shoulder blades had disappeared like it had never existed. Stumbling over the sand, he brought her back to the boat. Then he rowed like the wind back to the ship.

Sarafine's son was born on the deck of a ship. He took his first breath coated in the ashes of his people and the blood of his mother. The world trembled at his breath, the wheels of the destiny spun faster, the forces of darkness and light shuddered at his presence. His first shriek echoed across the ocean, drowning out Sarafine's last breath. She left this world with a smile, having done her duty to the Mother. The White Wolf was born.

Chapter 1

Summer 1841 A.F.R.

The Three Isles

"Do you think anything has changed?"

Hanni choose not to answer. Everything had changed. After six long years he could finally see the coast of Raviras in the distance and it looked just like his dreams. Except that the dreams had stopped a long time ago. He'd left his home as a boy and as a boy he'd mourned it. Now, returning as a man, he wished for nothing more but to turn back. He glanced at Alex and saw the boy drinking in the sight of the coast. No doubt he was looking forward to returning to his life of frivolity and leisure. As the younger son, Alex got to stay swaddled in his mother's skirts. No responsibilities, no pressure to be anything but a spoiled brat of a High Lord. There was a time Hanni had resented him for it. That time had passed. He understood his purpose now, his duty. Fighting against it had been futile. "What do you think the Prince is like? I heard that the scar is grotesque, quite a sight to behold. Do you think he really wears a mask in public?"

"Are you truly a brainless fool or do you just prefer to sound like one?"

The boy sighed, pushing the loose strands of hair out of his eyes. They looked nothing alike. Alex was their mother in miniature; blonde, flighty, with a skin that disliked sunshine and a brain that refused to engage in anything more serious than the latest fashion in coat collars. At sixteen, Alex was still no taller than Hanni's shoulder and quick with a blade only when he choose to be. In other words, when there was an opportunity to show off.

"You're not in Torra any more big brother, it's time to relax. No one will punish you for smiling, or slouching, or acting human for once. You don't even look happy to be back."

“Yes, the never ending pleasures of fawning maids and lickspittles. That alone is enough to cheer me up. The arrival of the little Prince is such a joyful occasion too. Perhaps if we kiss his behind enough, father can say I received an even better education to rule in his stead.”

Alex sighed again, “I’m hungry.”

Alex was the first to leave the ship, no doubt in a hurry to catch up with his little group of mindless friends. Hanni took his time leaving the cabin, making sure his sword was strapped on properly and his gear in order. His horse was below deck and would hopefully be unloaded quickly. In Torra, no man rode a carriage unless he was ill or elderly.

He descended the ship slowly, followed by the gaggle of servants his father had thought necessary to send. Alex had already disappeared but mother waited with her companions, her eyes lighting up when she sighted him. There was no untoward displays of affection. She offered her hand and he brushed his lips across the knuckles.

“It is good to have you back,” she said and Hanni bit back multiple responses that came to mind.

“Do you remember Lady Ayla?” she went on, steering him to a willowy, dark haired girl who blushed to the roots of her hair.

Of course he remembered. He’d picked flowers for her the day before his departure, promising not to forget her in a far away land, promising to return and marry her no matter how many years passed. The foolish dreams of a twelve year old boy. He kissed her hand and said nothing, meeting her hurt gaze with a flat stare. A foolish boy and a foolish girl. It would have been a joke if he still had it in him to laugh.

“Forgive me mother, I must see to the unloading of my horse.”

* * *

“You will strain your eyes Your Grace.”

“Are we there yet?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Danil sighed and rubbed his eyes. He wished for the peace and quiet of the Royal Library where the clerks were used to his odd routines and no one minded if he strained his eyes.

“You could get me another lamp,” he suggested.

Adito pulled a coat out of the armoire, “I would gladly do so Your Grace but I’m afraid it is supper time. His Royal Highness insists that you join your family for a meal.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Would you like me to inform His Royal Highness that you will not be attending?”

“Of course not. You know as well as I do that my father does not take no for an answer.”

“As you say Your Grace. Would you prefer the blue coat or the green?”

“How about black? It will match my mood.”

“I’m afraid Her Royal Highness had a hand in your choice of available colors.”

Danil groaned, "Never mind. Just pick a coat, any coat."

While Adito fussed over the coats, Danil gathered up his books and secured them in a chest. Then he hung the key back around his neck. Somewhere in those books and scrolls there was the answer. He would find it. One day he would find it.

He avoided his face in the mirror. Soon enough he would see it reflected in the shocked stares of the entire Kingdom, one Province at a time. His father insisted that the trip was not a punishment and perhaps it had not been meant as one, yet he was miserable none the less.

"If Your Grace will permit, it is a great relief to see that your head pains have eased. Why, you have not had any in days I believe."

Startled, Danil laughed, "True. Very true. Although if one would suddenly come on at this moment, father may get suspicious. Perhaps tomorrow."

"Perhaps," Adito agreed, brushing imaginary dust from the back of the coat, "Who can guess what the future holds?"

"No one," Danil felt his good mood leave as quickly as it came, "No one."

The supper was a horrid affair. Among the flickering candle light and the smells of roasted fish, Danil grew nauseous. He did not ask to be excused. Instead he waited until his father rose from the table, then gratefully escaped. He'd only just managed to unearth all the books again and spread them on the table when an insistent knocking on the door forced Adito back from the adjoining cabin.

"Your Grace? I could inform the visitor that you've retired for the night."

"No. I see that I am to have no peace. Admit them in."

He sighed in relief when Maxill's large shape swept in, "Your Grace, you left the dining hall rather abruptly. Another headache?"

Ignoring the veiled barb, Danil gestured to the table, "I was only in a hurry to return to my work. Would you take a seat? Maybe take a drink while you are here? Adito, a glass of wine for the Royal Counselor please."

"Red Adito, if you please. That white stuff the King received from Kayrenass is nothing short of a sacrilege."

Maxill did not sit. Instead he bent over the table to study the books.

"Quite a heavy read Your Grace. Dare I ask to what purpose?"

"Must a study of our land's history have a purpose? Other than the obvious."

"Ah," Maxill settled his large frame into a nearby chair, "so you are simply improving your knowledge for the purpose of being better informed. As an heir to the throne."

Danil was spared of having to answer by Adito who chose just that moment to serve Maxill his wine. Dismissing the man with a slight nod, Danil steeled himself for some unpleasant truths. Maxill was ever handy with those.

However Maxill drank his wine in silence and seemed content to say nothing.

Unable to bear the suspense, Danil resigned himself to having to ask, "What can I do for you Counselor?"

“Ah, yes. I’m afraid our trip will be cut short. I’m sorry to say but Brother Martin claims that a series of storms will strike the coast as the summer ends. After the visit to the Isis Province, the Royal ships will be sailing back to Jerussus.”

“Oh, thank the Gods.”

Maxill winked over the edge of his glass, “Yes, I was quite certain that this would be received as very good news by someone, it was just the matter of finding the lucky individual.”

“You need not search any longer.”

Placing the empty glass on the tray, Maxill leaned forward, “If Your Grace will permit, the King means well. His intent was simply to supply the sort of knowledge that can not be found in books and texts. The sort of knowledge that an heir to the throne must have if he were to ever hope of being a ruler of the wealthiest Kingdom in the world.”

“I understand.”

“I have no doubt you do, Your Grace.”

He stood up, “Forgive me from interrupting your solitary enjoyment. Perhaps you would join me for tea tomorrow?”

“Yes, thank you. I will look forward to it.”

Kayrenass

Kella paused at the stable doors. Perhaps a servant would pass by, or a stable hand. Anyone she could send inside without having to go in herself. It was so unfair that she was forced to chase Kenda around the castle as if she were a servant herself. She was sure that her hair must be in a wild disarray already and after poor Nin had spent hours curling it. The stench wafting from the inside of the stables was unbearable. If she were the Queen, she would never allow such a disgusting smell so close to her castle. Kella’s horse was housed in a little shed her father had gifted her with on the eve of her sixteenth summer day. Mist was a good horse; ladylike and skittish. She did not like other horses; a separate building to house her in had seemed like a perfect solution. Kella never went to fetch her anyway. That was what the servants were for. The same servants that should be out searching for Kenda instead of her. Was it even possible to enter the stables without getting her slippers filthy? And all that straw! What if it caught on the hem of her skirts and tore her dress? She caressed the blue silk as if soothing it. It was so unfair. This was her favorite dress too! Even Sir Nerth had complimented her on it and Sir Nerth *never* compliments anyone. Truly, there was no other color that brought such a shine to her copper curls. She would have to ask father for a permission to visit Madame Reugh again, she was sure that there were infinite varieties of blue she had not even considered yet. Her green dresses would have to go but perhaps she should keep the yellow. And the white, of course. Come to think of it, there were a couple of green ones that had been very well received at the last picnic. Didn’t Sir Maleshi mention that one of them matched her eyes perfectly? Which one was it? The square neck? The wide sleeves slashed in white? She would have to ask him. Not now of course, and not any time soon. The summer would pass with nothing in her closet but black dresses. What a stupid tradition that was! Black was the most horrid of all the colors, even worse than the pale pink Lady Mellina insisted on wearing, as if it didn’t make her look like a stuffed piglet. She was sure that the Queen would have put a stop to such a miserable and unflattering tradition had she only thought of it before falling ill. Surely she wouldn’t want her court looking like a bunch of crows.

The movement from the inside of the stables startled her and she put on her most haughty face.

“Kella. Did you get lost on your way to the Main Hall?”

Kella wrinkled her nose. Kenda smelled as bad as the stables! And she had the most disgusting smear on the side of her face. Was that actual dirt?

“What are you wearing??” she burst out.

Kenda looked down as if she only now realized that she had clothes on, “Breeches and a shirt.”

“You look like some.. some peasant! Honestly, do you never think about anyone but yourself? What if someone sees you like that? It’s embarrassing!”

Instead of getting upset by her outburst, Kenda only smirked. Even her braid had dirt in it! Glancing quickly around the stable yard just to make sure no one was watching, Kella let her mask drop.

“You could at least pretend you care about the honor and dignity of this family. Especially now! Hiding in the stables, honestly! The entire court is on their toes and you’re in here playing in the dirt. Do you always have to be so... so horrid!!”

That finally wiped the smirk off Kenda’s face.

She squared her shoulders, her black eyes flashing, “You would perhaps not care so much if someone did not think you irrelevant enough to send out in the search of me. I highly doubt you risked your precious slippers out of sisterly affection.”

“Grandmother has summoned you,” Kella let out through gritted teeth.

If Kenda was surprised by the summons she did not show it, “How long ago?”

“An hour at least. If she died waiting for you to show, on your head be it.”

Kenda strode past her, the black filthy braid only inches away from brushing against Kella’s silk wrapped shoulder.

“By the way,” Kenda went on without sparing her a glance, “your hair could use a brush.”

Her steps echoed on the marble floors. She could hear the servants whisper as she passed and knew that the scandal would spread in moments. The younger sister of the Heir to the throne presenting herself to the Queen while caked in mud. Her father would be angry again.

The Waiting Hall could not admit one more person. The entire Royal Family was crowded in the small space, suffocating each other in the false sympathy and overpowering perfumes. Kenda spotted her father in the corner, conversing with the Duchess of Larn. She looked away before he could meet her gaze. He would say nothing in front of an audience but she was loathe to risk it.

The two servants positioned at the Queen’s chamber doors made a point to pause before letting her in. Perhaps they were hoping she would change her mind and decide to put on a dress. At any other time, she would have done just that. Not to appease the court but to show respect to the Queen. Thanks to Kella though, the time was short now. She supposed that some of it was her fault; had she been just like the others, she would have been sweltering in the Waiting Room all day, hoping the Queen would summon her. But she was not like them, despite her heritage. She loathed the small spaces, the empty flattery and the witty banter. Most of it went right over her head anyway.

The Queen's chamber caught the last rays of the setting sun, the dust motes dancing cheerfully through the air. It was surprisingly silent. Kenda had attended the Queen many times over the years, usually with a passel of other high born girls. Without their restless chatter, the chamber seemed larger and a great deal more intimidating. Brother Jon glanced at her and his mouth tightened. Even across the vast space, she could sense his disapproval. "Kenda. Finally. Brother Jon, you may go now."

Where the chamber had grown larger, the Queen had shrank. Propped up against a multitude of white pillows, she threatened to match them in color. Loose skin hung from her face and neck. A mere summer ago she had been joking about having to let out her dresses; the illness had eaten her away with a surprising swiftness, leaving almost no sign of the woman Kenda had grown up knowing.

"Your Majesty, it would be better if I stayed. What if the pain returns?"

"Then I will bear it or I will die."

Kenda almost smiled. The Queen's voice may not have the strength it once had but she lost none of her power to command. Brother Jon huffed, gathered his books and bowed low. When the door closed behind him, Kenda approached the bed, feeling like a child again.

"Come, sit. I see you were out in the stables again."

Lowering herself gingerly into an ornate chair, Kenda hoped she wouldn't leave mud stains behind. Perhaps she should have taken the time to change.

"I was. Lark had foaled in the night. I believe this will be her last."

"Is the foal healthy?"

"Healthy and lively, although this one is not pure. He has blotches of dark brown over the white. They'll grow lighter as he grows older."

Kenda studied the pale hands resting on the silk coverlet. It was odd to see no diamonds or emeralds gracing the familiar fingers. Naked, they looked unfinished, a painting stopped in mid-stroke.

"I should have spoken to you sooner," the Queen said softly, "years ago, in fact. But your fool mother had to go and break her neck falling off a horse. There had been no need to worry about the succession before; I could have died peacefully knowing that she would have made the right choice. But she's dead. Now I'm dying and Katra is the next in line. Seas help us all."

Kenda left off studying the white-blond hairs clumped on the backs of the pillows and wondered if she'd missed some part of the conversation.

"Grandmama? I'm not quite sure..."

The Queen of Kayrenass snatched one of her hands and gripped it with surprising fury, "You're not a fool Kenda. I know your father would debate me on it until we were both dead and buried but I've always known that you are not a fool."

The steel blue eyes bored into hers, "I could have changed the rules within my lifetime, had there been a need for it. But I had an heir. A daughter who's only failing was the inability to find a man to match her in intelligence. When she died, it was too late to try and change things. In the morning, Katra will be the Queen of Kayrenass and you will be the next in line. You must, must make me a promise before this happens."

Kenda clasped the frail hand between both of hers, afraid to squeeze too tightly, "Anything grandmama. I've always obeyed you."

"True. Seas know you've never listened or obeyed anyone else," Kenda blushed but the Queen went on, unheeding, "Katra is a silly, flighty creature. Perhaps not as bad as Kella but this small mercy will not save the Kingdom from ruin. You must stay by her. Be her reason, her conscience, for we both know she has none of her own. Try and guide her as best as you can."

Kenda's shock overpowered her ability to speak. Stay by Katra? Guide her? Had the Queen asked her to wrestle a fully grown bear with her naked hands, Kenda would have found the task easier to comprehend.

"Grandmama," she tried to reason, "Katra will be a Queen. She will not want my company or guidance."

"It doesn't matter what the silly tart wants, you must find a way. You have been a child long enough. It is time to assume the power and responsibility that comes with your heritage. One day, this Kingdom just may be yours to rule. Will you let it crumble to dust while you hunt and help birth foals?"

"No," Kenda frowned, "of course not."

"Then do your duty to your people. Katra is capable of spending the Royal Treasury in a matter of years and starting a war over a perceived insult to her hair. She must be closely watched by someone who will never be intimidated by her status, someone who will never hesitate to tell her that she is acting like a fool. You can do this. You have been doing it for years. Except that now, millions of lives will depend on it."

"But grandmama, I—"

"Promise me Kenda. You must. There is no one else."

For the first time in her life, Kenda saw a flash of fear in her grandmother's eyes.

"I promise," she said quietly.

The Queen released her hand and sunk back into the pillows, "Good. You may go. Send your father in here."

She closed her eyes, "Seas know the man will not heed a word I say but I must try none the less."

Kenda stood up slowly, only now feeling a lump form in her throat. She swallowed it down and performed a graceful curtsy despite the lack of a dress. She did not see the Queen smile.

* * *

Asim stared at the flames. He'd started drinking when the sun went down. Half a bottle of apple brandy later, he knew that nothing would drown his guilt. Still, he poured himself another glass.

He should be at court. The word had reached him weeks ago and although he'd received no summons, he'd had no doubt that the Queen had expected him to appear as he always has. Especially now. The Kingdom was at its most unstable when the throne passed hands. This time even more so; instead of passing the throne down to her daughter, the Queen was forced to hand it over to a granddaughter. Asim remembered Katra well. A vain little thing with none of her mother's sense and all of her father's pride. Just the thought of that spoiled child ruling the land made him shudder. He ached to know which Royal Advisors were positioned close to the girl. Would her sisters have any influence over her? Her father? What difference would their influence make and would it be for better or

worse? Once upon a time this was his bread and butter. His reason for living. Five years ago he would have been at the court at the smallest whisper of the Queen's illness, offering his services. Instead, he dared not even leave the manor house for long periods of time.

The boy had turned his life upside down. At two years old, Lux had been the oddest child anyone had ever set eyes on. His skin was as white as the snow of the land he came from; the sun did not seem to bother it in the least. He never burned or tanned regardless of the time he spent outdoors. His eyes were the liquid gold of a beast, a color never found in the eyes of a human child. His hair had grown in, the silver of the sea reflected moonlight. He'd started forming full sentences by then, scaring the wits out of the poor farm girl Asim had hired to watch the boy. Still, it was all easily explained. The boy came from a strange land no one knew anything about. He was smarter than most children his age and he was obviously different. An orphan. Most people would overlook the strangeness when faced with an orphan. Or at least, they had so far.

Asim drained his glass and refilled it. Everything was going well until last winter when Mrs. Cook came running into his office, babbling about wolves. The poor woman had been terrified out of her mind. He'd followed her outside and found Lux sitting on the ground across from a large white wolf. He would never forget that picture; it had been seared into his memory. Five year old Lux, long silver braid almost brushing the dirt, and the white wolf, panting with its tongue stuck out like some sort of a house pet. When Asim stepped out into the yard, they had both turned to look at him, their eyes identical. Poor Mrs. Cook had screamed and Asim could not blame her. He'd felt like screaming himself. The boy and the wolf had looked at each other again briefly. Asim wished that he hadn't seen it happen. He wished he could pretend that the boy had not been communicating with the beast in some strange way. The wolf had nodded, like a human receiving instruction, and looped off towards the forest. Mrs. Cook had continued screaming until Asim was forced to slap her. That had been unfortunate too. Within an hour she'd had her things packed and Asim had lost a valuable housekeeper.

And the boy? The boy had been unfazed by the entire thing. He readily told Asim about his 'new friend' who lived in the forest and also liked to hunt rabbits. Yes, he could talk to this new friend quite easily. How? The boy couldn't explain it. Worse, ever since that day there had been more wolves in the area. The large white one had not come back to Asim's knowledge, but he would swear that there was an entire pack nearby.

He hated himself for the options he'd been forced to consider. Everything from returning the boy to his own people to summoning a local Brother. In the end, he'd done nothing. Lux was a son he never knew he wanted. Asim couldn't bear the thought of the boy being taken away from him. The boy was strange in some ways but in other, he was like any other boy his age. Curious, bright, quick to laugh or cry. He'd brought life to a house that had sat empty for many summers.

Still, something had to be done. At the very least, Asim had to know what the boy was. Was he even human? Or something more? How to inquire without attracting attention to him? He would have to pull some strings and contact people that he hadn't spoken to since his retirement. In the end, he might have to face the fact that there is no answers, no explanations.

